

Independent Record

Air ambulance conversation is just getting started

TODD LOVSHIN

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There's been considerable discussion over the last year about air ambulances, their membership programs, and their billing practices. This conversation has led to an increased knowledge of the true issues, and has brought more air ambulance providers to insurer networks, decreasing the number of Montana citizens subject to crippling bills. The conversation has already helped.

Air ambulance providers offer valuable life-saving services to those in crisis. They are essential to ensure Montanans get the care they need when they need it. The medical and flight professionals who perform these services are top notch and an important part of the emergency medical response teams for our rural state, often making the difference between life and death. Therefore, it is important for insurers to make sure that these providers are in-network and that our members have access to the numerous companies providing these services.

Unfortunately, some of these non-hospital-based providers have declined to contract with insurers, leaving many Montanans with thousands of dollars in outstanding bills.

Some air ambulance companies sell memberships for air transport in case of emergency. However, members are covered only if that company is the one to transport. If you're a member, they will not balance bill you any amount that your insurer doesn't pay. They accept your membership fee and the standard insurance reimbursement as payment in full. Unfortunately, if a different company (of the 14 known providers currently operating in the state) provides the service, you have no coverage. I gamble some, but I don't like those odds.

A few air ambulance providers say they won't come in-network because insurers won't pay enough. How much is enough? When examining what air ambulance providers have charged insurers, we see charges that range from 150 percent to over 2,200 percent of the same baseline price. A recent example -- over \$50,000 to fly a patient from Helena to Missoula.

Air ambulance providers justify these charges by stating that the aircraft is expensive equipment to purchase and operate, the 24 hour on-call status of medical personnel adds costs and that the services are important and life-saving. I agree. Where we part company with some providers is when their costs are surprisingly out of line with others in the industry offering the same services.

What is the solution? Air ambulance providers are not regulated by the states. Instead they fall under the purview of the Federal Aviation Administration, the same section that regulates airlines like Delta and Alaska. Therefore, there are very limited instances where the state can create its own regulations for these providers.

The Economic Affairs Interim Committee's work group on this topic has been discussing some potential fixes to settle disputes between insurers and providers. While there are some interesting approaches in the works to protect Montanans from being balance billed, we feel it doesn't solve the real problem -- the refusal of a few providers to even sit down and talk to insurers.

A true federal fix is needed, and we're confident Sen. Daines and Sen. Tester will work together in Congress to deliver that fix.

Until then, what can be done here in Montana? We need to continue to be transparent about which air ambulance providers are in network, and educate medical personnel about the numerous in-network options for these services. Furthermore, air ambulance providers should be transparent in their billing, just as hospitals are, and just as insurers are required to be with their rate process.

Again, we are thankful for the scores of highly trained men and women who lay their hands on broken bodies in Montana, and quickly transport them to necessary medical services. We stand ready to continue this conversation, to work with the businesses who employ those qualified individuals, and to pay reasonable rates associated with those services.

Todd Lovshin is the vice-president and Montana regional director of PacificSource Health Plans.